

# THE NEW YORK TIMES

October 26, 2001

Pg. 1

## Not Yet Citizens But Eager To Fight For The U.S.

*By David W. Chen and Somini Sengupta*

As a youth in Kazakhstan, Alexandr Manin had no interest in the war that the Soviet Union was waging in Afghanistan in the 1980's. But since arriving in New York three years ago, he has had a change of heart, and has joined the military.

The United States military, that is.

Mr. Manin, who is here as a legal permanent resident but is not yet a United States citizen, is scheduled to leave on Nov. 5 for basic training with the Marines. The law allows permanent residents like him - those who have a green card - to enlist.

"It doesn't matter that America is not my country; New York is my city, and what happened shook my life," said Mr. Manin, a fast-talking 25-year-old from Greenpoint, Brooklyn. "I feel patriotic, and I have this itch now to go sooner."

Particularly in New York, with its huge population of immigrants, many residents for years have been signing up to fight under the American flag, even though they do not carry an American passport. In fact, immigrant men and women seem more likely to enlist than their native-born peers.

In New York City, 13 percent of those under the age of 18 are immigrants, both legal and illegal. But in the Navy, 1,200,

or 40 percent, of all New York City recruits were green-card holders in the last year. In the Marines, the number is 363, or 36 percent; in the Army, it is 589, or 27 percent.

On a national level, the percentage of green-card military recruits is relatively small, hovering around 5 percent for most services. Even so, the proportions have been steadily rising in recent years, especially in cities like Los Angeles and Miami.

There is no simple explanation for why these permanent residents opt for the military. Some do it because they want to speed up the citizenship process. Some do it because they are, like many immigrants, of meager means and believe that the military offers economic and social mobility. And some do it because they feel patriotic and want badly to belong.

That has been especially true during wartime historically, and the weeks after Sept. 11 are no exception.

"There's an us versus them thing," said Philip Kasinitz, a sociologist at Hunter College who studies the assimilation of the children of immigrants. "This happens in wartime generally. As a result, a lot of immigrants and certainly the children of immigrants feel a need to assert which side of the line they are on."

Many of the green-card recruits in New York reflect the city's changing demographics, and come from countries in Latin America and the Caribbean such as the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Ecuador.

And while there are proportionally fewer recruits with Asian backgrounds, one immigrant from Hong Kong, Wai Wan, a 22-year-old from Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, recently joined the Air Force because he thought the technical training would look impressive on his résumé. But after Sept. 11, he felt a patriotic tug, too.

"We asked for computer-related jobs," said Mr. Wan, who signed up with a friend, Alex Wong (a Brazilian green card holder). "But now, we've been looking for combat-related jobs."

For immigrants, the military has long served as a gateway to the American mainstream and a ticket to American acceptance. Indeed, to prove their loyalty, many Japanese- American men volunteered in the Second World War, even as their families were forced into internment camps as "enemy aliens."

There are tangible benefits as well. For permanent residents, military service can shorten the wait to apply for citizenship from five to three years.

Between 1994 and 1999, more than 3,600 immigrants became United States citizens through this provision, according to the Immigration and Naturalization Service. There is nothing in immigration law that prohibits illegal immigrants from serving in the military, but the services say anyone without the proper documentation is automatically rejected.

But even those immigrants who do qualify but are not citizens face restrictions, too. They are not eligible for up to \$17,000 in college tuition aid under the R.O.T.C. program. They are generally not allowed to perform certain duties, including reconnaissance, intelligence and data systems.

If they are from what the military deems to be a hostile country like Afghanistan or Iraq, they need to go through additional security checks. But residents from Egypt or Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of the Sept. 11 hijackers, are not considered to be from hostile countries and need no special security clearance.

Through the years, a few improbable figures have emerged from the gallery of immigrant soldiers. The Marines can claim the famous - Shaggy, the Jamaican-born and Brooklyn-raised singer - and the infamous - Hussein Mohammed Farah, the son of the late Somali warlord, Gen. Mohammed Farah Aidid.

But the numbers in New York now are stark. In some neighborhoods, like Flatbush in Brooklyn or Washington Heights in Manhattan, up to 90 percent of recruits are not yet citizens.

Some 40 percent of all Naval recruits in New York City in the last fiscal year which ended in September, were green-card holders, up from perhaps 20 percent a decade ago, said Senior Chief Tim Stewart of the Navy Recruiting District New York. Throughout the country, the figure was 8 percent, up from 5 percent in 1995.

The Navy's national recruiter of the year was Petty Officer Second Class Lenny Ramos, whose territory includes most of Manhattan. And one of his most recent green-card recruits was Samantha Ruiz, 19, who moved to Washington Heights 11 years ago from the Dominican Republic and signed up two weeks ago.

This summer, she gave some thought, though not serious, to joining the military because of the citizenship and travel perks. But then came the terrorist attacks.

"That pushed me along to make me really want to join," said Ms. Ruiz, who now spends much of her time as a volunteer in the Navy's recruiting office in Harlem. "This is my home now. And I just felt, I would better be able to contribute by being in the Navy."

In Lower Manhattan this week Gunnery Sgt. Duane Silvera, who is in charge of Marine recruiting in Manhattan, welcomed Mr. Manin, the Kazakhstan native, into his office near City Hall to go over some final preparations before he starts basic training at Parris Island, S.C.

Mr. Manin said that his wife - an American citizen whom he married in 1999 - had mixed feelings. And his parents, who still live in his hometown of Petropavlovsk, were uncomfortable with his decision because they know of too many young men who never came

back or were disabled after the Soviet war with Afghanistan.

But he was unbowed. He talked excitedly about becoming an infantryman, maybe doing reconnaissance work, maybe using his fluency in Kazakh (which is similar to Uzbek), Russian, Polish and Czech.

"I've been asking that I can go to Afghanistan to participate," Mr. Manin said.

His brother, Pacha, a 20-year-old who is now studying English at Fordham, wanted to enlist, too. But he is here on a student visa and does not have a green card - not yet.

But Sergeant Silvera, 35, said that if Pacha Manin gets his green card, he would be a prime candidate. After all, Sergeant Silvera himself was a permanent resident and Jamaican citizen when he enlisted in the Marines.